

*** NETANSWERS INTERNET EXTRA ***
*** Number 61: Open Directory Project ***

Back in issue 43, I wrote about NewHoo, a unique Web site index. Since then, NewHoo has grown into something bigger, the Open Directory Project.

The Open Directory Project looks and feels a lot like Yahoo. The major difference is that the ODP's site listings are maintained by the Internet community. ODP "editors" are volunteers who agree to maintain site listings in categories that interest them.

It's a good concept: let people interested in mapmaking chart the mapmaking category, while insomniacs can stay up late updating the sleep disorders category. This allows people "in the know" to include the best sites, rather than relying on a paid editorial staff to maintain site listings on topics they may know nothing about.

At the bottom of the ODP home page (<http://www.dmoz.org>) you'll see impressive statistics about the size of the directory. When I last checked, the stats proclaimed more than 530,000 site listings in 83,000 categories, with 11,000 editors keeping them all organized. The site seems to be growing at a phenomenal rate -- a week ago, when I first researched this article, there were 30,000 fewer site listings and 4,000 fewer editors. I suspect the current numbers will pale in comparison with the stats by the time you, gentle reader, visit the site.

The numbers also pale in comparison to Yahoo. Probably. Yahoo doesn't reveal the number of sites it lists or how many categories it stuffs them in.

In issue 43, I wrote "NewHoo's directory is small compared with Yahoo, but NewHoo generally contains links to higher quality sites." That's still true with the Open Directory Project. For instance, Yahoo's "Humor" category has some 5,600 listings, while the ODP offers less than 800. Of course, Yahoo has been around longer, has more users, and has had more opportunities to cultivate its listings. But the ODP's relative smallness is still an asset: it may not have links to every humor (or mapmaking or insomnia...) site, but chances are with ODP, you'll have to try fewer of them before you find the information you're looking for.

Quality counts more than quantity. As the "About the Open Directory Project" page states, "citizens can each organize a small portion of the Web and present it back to the rest of the population, culling out the bad and useless and keeping only the best content."

The ODP is a lot like the fictional book "The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy" -- written by many people over a long period, unevenly edited, but still, on the whole, very useful.

If a particular category really isn't up to snuff, the ODP doesn't want to hear you complain about it -- they want you to do something about it. The ODP encourages users to submit new site listings or, even better, become editors themselves. Editors have the ability to add and edit site listings and descriptions, recommending the best sites to the surfers that come across that category.

If you become an editor of a category, and decide that you like it, you can sign up for more categories to make your mark elsewhere. Surfers can view profiles of editors -- it can be interesting to see the odd combinations of topics that interest people. One guy edits categories about video games and Dr. Pepper. Another editor, clearly a Renaissance man, maintains the Fishing, Insurance Forms, and Easter Apparel categories.

The old NewHoo directory was acquired by Netscape, so the Open Directory Project is now under Netscape's umbrella. Sooner or later, you'll probably see information from the ODP at other Web sites. In the spirit of sharing and building the Internet, information from the Open Directory Project can be used by anyone to create other Web sites, books, and whatever other derivative materials they might imagine, for free. (Netscape is infected with this spirit -- it is the same logic that inspired it to give away the source code for its Web browser.)

All in all, the Open Directory Project is a worthy Web directory. It is definitely worthy of your surfing time -- and if you like what you see, you may deem it worthy of some of your time as an editor.

=*=*= RELEVANT WEB SITES =*=*=

Open Directory Project: <http://www.dmoz.org>

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Got comments or ideas for future issues? We want to hear 'em. Just send a message to savetz@compuserve.com (74774,2725).

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